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Book section (Accepted version)

Original citation:

Originally published in Melvin, J. (ed.), *Richard Rogers: inside out, exhibition catalogue*. London: Royal Academy of Arts, ISBN 9781907533617

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This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/51797/>

Available in LSE Research Online: Sept 2013

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Text by Ricky Burdett for the catalogue of the Royal Academy Exhibition on Richard Rogers, Summer 2013

LEGACIES OF AN ARCHAIC MODERNIST: EMBRACING CITIES. SHAPING LONDON.

The archaic modernist

Under the gnarled branches and robust torso of a centennial Tuscan oak tree (*Quercus Frainetto*) in the Val d'Orcia, Richard Rogers is at work at six in the morning. Curved over his leather hand-all, flipping through piles of plastic folders marked-up with pink and yellow Day-Glo post-it notes, Rogers starts his day early – wherever he is. His avuncular frame invariably draped in vibrant colours moves deliberately as he fiddles with his pink rubber-clad I-Phone or scribbles down thoughts with his signature green felt pen. The arch-Modern architect and urbanist, author of some of the most radical buildings of the last forty years, is totally at home in this ancient landscape.

Born in Florence eighty years ago, less than an hours' drive from the Val d'Orcia, Rogers' attachment to this land is both visceral and contemporary. His life has been a balancing act between the past and the future, between Italian cultural values and progressive English pragmatism, between designing responsive buildings and raising awareness on the health of the planet. This dialectic has engrained in him a deeply humanist and positivistic outlook on life: a strong political ethos which has shaped his practice and thinking in architecture and city-making over the last five decades.

With buildings and projects in global megacities like Shanghai or Mexico City, it is difficult to imagine that small Tuscan towns have been for Rogers a continuous source of inspiration. Standing in the main square of Pienza in his cobalt blue shirt, Rogers blends in to an environment that captures the hues and shades of a Giotto or Piero della Francesca fresco and the early masters of the *Quattrocento* who gave birth to the Renaissance in towns and villages nearby.

In this near-perfect urban artefact of Pienza, he enthuses about the 15th century Renaissance architect Rosselino and his client, the great patron Pope Pius II. Together they created one of the most beautiful urban set-pieces of any city anywhere in the world. It is not only the shape, scale and texture of the buildings and spaces that appeal to Rogers – from the worn marble public seating at the base of the Bishop's Palace to the exquisite detailing of the 500-year old paving - but also the perfect harmony between the city and nature that constitutes, in his eyes, a synthesis of environmental and social potential of architectural and urban form.

Rogers often bemuses his audiences in Asia or the Americas (where cities of 20 million sprawl endlessly across the horizon) with picture-postcard views of these elemental, 'compact' cities, perched on top of hills and enclosed by city walls, which stop abruptly where the Tuscan countryside begins. The lessons to be learnt, for him, are clear. However large or small, regardless of geographical location and economic prowess, cities are delicate eco-systems that can be 'designed' to be sustainable, or not. Like Rosselino and Pope Pius II, it is the role of the architect and his patron – mayor or minister, developer or investor - to conceive of architecture as a spatial and ethical art with profound social and environmental consequences. It is precisely this mission, pursued relentlessly and passionately for decades, that has kept Rogers at the foreground of public debate both in the UK and abroad.

Embracing cities

More than any designer in the post-World War II era, Richard Rogers has put cities squarely on the map, and introduced the environment and society onto the architectural agenda. In this he follows in the tradition of the great urban proselytizers Ebenezer Howard, Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs but with far more *edge*. He has the urgency of a practising architect with a deep belief in the transformative power of design and technology. In this, Rogers was strongly influenced by the ethical perspective of his elder cousin Ernesto Nathan Rogers, one of the major intellectuals, architectural critics and practitioners (with BBPR) of mid-20th century Italy.

At a time that Modernism was seen as a social failure and design became increasingly aestheticized, Rogers worked hard to re-socialise architectural and urban practice. It is easy to forget how abstract the architectural debate had become by the 1970s and 1980s, where style and form shaped discourse and practice. Post-Modernism, Neo-Classicism, Late-Modernism and High-Tech (a term Rogers has always shunned) were the keywords of the architectural elites of the day. The decline of post-1945 state interventionism and the establishment of neo-liberalism in the UK and USA relegated architecture to a de-socialised practice while cities were seen as the province of technical planners and bureaucrats.

Rogers' humanist outlook and uncompromising belief in the power of design (new technologies, (new materials, new forms of communication) has allowed him to carve out a rather unique space amongst 20th and early 21st century architects. Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Gehry, Norman Foster, Rem Koolhaas and Zaha Hadid have all played a fundamental role in re-shaping the debate and language of architecture, but Rogers stands alone in working *within* the profession and on the *edges* at the interface of design and the political. His practice always comes at the top of the most desirable architectural offices for your designers, and he is regularly asked to consult No 10 on urban policy.

Rogers' combination of die-hard optimism, natural communication skills, unshakeable self-assuredness and prize-fighter tenacity is a powerful cocktail that has worked effectively across different constituencies of clients, politicians, fellow designers and cultural commentators. As critic and teacher Robert Maxwell has noted, he is a full-bodied Modernist rather than a Revisionist who 'is old enough to be immersed in modernism, but young enough to have inherited the mantle of modernism rather than to have invented it'. For Maxwell, Rogers has embraced 'the purpose of the avant-garde art which is to change consciousness and prepare for the future.' (*Casabella*, April 1984 pp16-71).

In this respect Rogers has shown himself to be constructively relentless, both in his belief that he is right and that something can be done to improve things. In the popular BBC Radio 4 programme *Desert Island Discs*, Rogers acknowledged that he learnt this can-do attitude from his enlightened Italian parents who always supported him as a child after arriving in the frosty environment of war-time Britain. Despite bullying at school and rough treatment by teachers due to his dyslexia and the social awkwardness of a foreign child, he explained that he 'never knew the word *impossible*'. From this psychological perspective Rogers has developed an ethical and practical philosophy that espouses the future, convinced that 'we have to use technology, politics and art to make our cities liveable for the 21st century. The remarkable capacity of technology puts the future on our side.'

Rogers has always been passionate about cities. For him, they are 'the cradle of civilisation, a place for societies to come together and exchange ideas.' Yet, when given the chance to deliver the prestigious BBC Reith Lectures in 1995 (the only practising architect to have ever done so), Rogers used his platform as a rallying call to do something, to 'stop the rot', to turn cities (like London) round, and make them more sustainable as social and environmental metabolisms.

In the mid-1990s, Britain was coming out of a deep recession, and the political mood was shifting after over 15 years of Conservative government. The collapse of the Berlin Wall, the impact of globalisation on national economies and increased awareness of the environmental crisis created a new context for a high-level debate. Rogers grabbed the opportunity to put cities and sustainability at the very heart of the public agenda.

His opening paragraphs for the Reith Lectures give a flavour of his approach: 'Above us, as I speak, the 400 or so satellites currently in orbit witness and gauge the global impact of a human population that has leapt from 1.5 to 5.5 billion in this century alone. Coldly they confirm the grim realities we all experience in our daily lives as we step out into the city. It is a shocking revelation - especially to me as an architect - that the world's environmental crisis is being driven by our cities. For the first time in history, half the world's population live in cities. In 1900 it was only one-tenth. In 30 years, it may be as much as three-quarters. The urban population of the world is increasing at a rate of a quarter of a million people per day - think of it as a new London every month.'

As this extract reveals, Rogers is both an eloquent communicator but a strong believer in facts and statistics. An avid reader of everything from government reports on housing standards to the latest data on carbon emissions, Rogers works more like a forensic scientist than an artist. He is careful not to base his arguments on subjective impressions but on robust evidence and logic.

Shaping London

Despite working in different cities across the globe and building *the* canonical late 20th century architectural icon in Paris (Pompidou), it is in London that Rogers has left his greatest mark. But it has not been easy. It is a city which draws affection and frustration in equal measure. It epitomises for Rogers the humanist city, where his parents chose to live and to escape the tyrannies of Fascism of 1930s Italy. It is a generous and balanced city where parks, squares and terraces define a high quality public realm. Yet, it is a city that for many years turned its back on these very qualities of social equity and public spirit. Many areas became degraded during the 1970s and 1980s; major public spaces were turned into traffic roundabouts and market-led development threatened the delicate social cohesion of the world's first megacity.

Rogers has cared passionately about London since the late 1970s when he returned from Paris. But nearly all his early projects came to nought, with the exception of Lloyds of London. The city became an urban laboratory of ideas for Rogers and his colleagues. His early 1980s schemes for the redevelopment of Coin Street in London's South Bank were the first to suggest a new pedestrian crossing of the River Thames. The controversial National Gallery competition of 1982, where Rogers' envisaged opening up Trafalgar Square ended up stoking a useless debate on architectural style that lasted at least a decade. Rogers' imaginative response to a major redevelopment of Paternoster Square in 1987 next to St Paul's Cathedral was ultimately scuppered by dark princely powers as well. And, in the middle of this, at the height of her reign, Margaret Thatcher abolished the Greater

London Council (for Rogers 'a purely vindictive and politically-motivated action') leaving London without a voice, its future determined by Whitehall civil servants and competing London boroughs.

But during this relatively fallow period, in which Rogers considered moving full-time to academia as Head of the Bartlett School of Architecture at UCL, a number of personal and strategic alliances took shape that gave him a unique platform as a tireless campaigner *for* London. He became a trustee and then chairman of the Tate Gallery, a prestigious though then fusty institution that introduced Rogers to new dimensions of London's political establishment. He was awarded the Royal Gold Medal in 1985. Significantly, the Royal Academy afforded him his greatest public opportunity in the 1986 'Foster Stirling Rogers' exhibition where he chose to imagine 'London As It Could Be', a memorable installation of fresh ideas for central London and the River Thames that contain the seeds of many of the capital's more ambitious projects which have since been realised, though a few remain obstinately still-born.

Some of these ideas and much of the underpinning analysis found their way into 'A New London', a small book written in 1992 with the Labour Shadow Arts Minister Mark Fischer, consolidating Rogers' relationship with New Labour. In fact, it is a sign of Richard Rogers' authority and his relentless campaigning skills that he received many of his most prestigious accolades under Tory governments. He was knighted, received the Royal Gold Medal and made chair of the Tate Gallery under Mrs Thatcher; he was made a member of the House of Lords (as a Labour peer) and invited to give the prestigious BBC Reith Lectures under John Major. Only in 1997, was he given a full role in the New Labour government to chair the Urban Task Force that, as Anne Power has described, became instrumental in changing urban policy in England in favour of cities and their regeneration.

In the 1995 Reith Lectures, Rogers lists a number of projects and initiatives that could transform the quality of life for London's citizens. He argued for a system of road pricing which would reduce traffic by 30%. Less than a decade later Ken Livingstone implemented the Congestion Charge, still seen today as a model of good urban governance. Rogers pushed for the pedestrianisation of Trafalgar Square, linking the National Gallery to the square and its fountains for the enjoyment of all Londoners. This was realised by Norman Foster in 2000. In the same radio programme, Rogers suggested that Exhibition Road could become a 'pedestrianized millennium avenue, part of a network of tree-lined routes across London'. Dixon Jones completed a version of this project in 2011 in time for the Olympic Games. He argued for the revitalisation of the River Thames, especially in the stretch between Westminster Bridge and Tower Bridge, to make more of London most 'under-used public amenity'. With the completion of the Millennium Bridge and the opening of the Tate Modern this very stretch of river has become an active and much-used place for visitors and Londoners. On summer weekends it is used by as many as 200,000 people a day.

But Rogers' most profound angst for London was political rather than architectural. 'London must not be abandoned to the mercy of the market - to cars, pollution and poverty' he argued. 'London offers every opportunity to create a cultured, balanced, and sustainable city. But to achieve this, Londoners themselves must be empowered to shape their future'. The combined effect of Rogers' advocacy, reinforced by the Architecture Foundation (which Rogers chaired from 1991) and its Public Forum Debates, the changing political mood in the city and the election of the New Labour government in 1997 led to Londoners being able to vote – for the very first time in history – for their own directly elected mayor.

In 2000, Ken Livingstone was voted in as mayor and Rogers was appointed Chief Adviser on Architecture and Urbanism giving him the opportunity to push for the ideas that he had been promoting for the last decades. It was not a totally smooth ride, with Rogers becoming impatient with political timelines and the debilitating impact of bureaucracy in all government agencies. He worked unpaid with Ken Livingstone for eight years and then stood down after a few bumpy years with Boris Johnson.

Today, you can see Rogers' fingerprints all over the London Plan, the capital's blueprint for future development. It bears the hallmarks of Rogers' urban thinking articulated over past decades and enshrined in the Urban Task Force report *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. The Green Belt should be protected. Brownfield sites should be developed with new housing and mixed communities. Public transport should be enhanced. The public realm should be given a facelift. The car should be tamed and priority given to cyclists and pedestrians. And, as we have seen with the success of the 2012 London Olympics, East London should become the focus for sustained investment to make London more equitable and sustainable than ever before.

Rogers continues to push and agitate for London. Over twenty years ago on *Desert Island Discs* he called for the fences around London's beautiful squares to be pulled down. He would like all Londoners to enjoy some of the city's most attractive landscaped spaces which are only enjoyed by the privileged few. He is back again on this campaign, and is restarting the debate about the future of the Victoria Embankment, the one south-facing stretch of river that still remains unfriendly and dominated by the car. He is raising awareness of the acute housing shortage that is pricing people out of this quintessentially humanist city.

Rogers' affair with London is an on-going story and the passion continues to run. An improved, more liveable London will be one of Rogers' lasting legacies. Few architects can make such claims for any city, let alone London, even with a fifty-year portfolio. Yet, Rogers has left his mark not just on the urban landscape of existing cities across the globe but, more importantly, on the way we think and design the next generation of cities of an increasingly urban world.

Quercus

This exceptional staying power and unshakeable belief in the art of the possible are defining Rogers' characteristics. Just like his bright collarless shirts and comfortable shoes which he has worn for decades, Rogers sticks to his guns and is profoundly loyal. His relationship to a very extended family – sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, brother, cousins, in-laws, former partners, office colleagues and hundreds of friends who are considered and consider themselves as family - is as genuine as his connection to the Tuscan landscape. And, good food always takes centre stage –whether it is at the River Café or the generous environment of Rogers' home. But nothing has been as important in his life as his synergetic relationship with Ruthie, wife and companion for over 30 years. Together they have created a context of creativity, curiosity, community and warmth that transcends the power of his work and ideas.

It was in fact Ruthie who asked me, along with other friends and family, to come up with *one* word that summarised my sense of Richard in the occasion of his 70th birthday, a decade ago. I immediately went back to the noble Tuscan Oak – the *Quercus Frainetto*. For me, Rogers' physical presence, personality and demeanour speak of the groundedness, reliability and continuity of this

enduring species, reflecting a sense self-assuredness and optimism that is both infectious and comforting.